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TAGS: [PHUM](#) [PGOV](#) [RO](#)

SUBJECT: ROMANIA: TIME FOR PROGRESS ON ORTHODOX-GREEK
CATHOLIC DISPUTE?

REF: 2009 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

Classified By: Ambassador Mark Gitenstein for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

¶1. (C) Summary: In an October 23 introductory call with the Romanian Orthodox (BOR) Patriarch, Ambassador discussed the long-standing dispute between the BOR and the Greek Catholic Church in Romania over Greek Catholic buildings and properties transferred to the BOR by Romania's communist regime (ref). The Patriarch, critical of Greek Catholics but aware of negative publicity surrounding his own church, suggested that the two parties re-start negotiations to resolve the dispute. Separately, a U.S.-based representative of the Greek Catholic Church expressed initial, cautious interest in his proposal. Both sides have an array of bargaining chips at their disposal, but mutual suspicions remain. A continuation of the status quo favors the BOR, which retains possession of hundreds of Greek Catholic properties and has significant influence with the population at large and political leaders. End Summary.

¶2. (C) During his discussion with the Ambassador, the Patriarch repeated his past criticism of the International Religious Freedom Report as favoring unfairly the Greek-Catholic "whiners." Nevertheless, he acknowledged that negative perceptions of the BOR abroad over its unwillingness to return properties to the minority Greek Catholics could adversely impact the hundreds of thousands of Romanian Orthodox believers living in Italy, Spain and elsewhere as religious minorities themselves. The Patriarch suggested that the two churches restart a face-to-face dialogue, with meetings on a regular basis. A U.S.-based representative of the Greek Catholic Church separately told us that the Church may be interested in sitting down, but only under certain as yet unspecified pre-conditions which he and his colleagues would have to establish. He noted that the BOR broke off a prior dialogue in 2005 and continued its refusals to return many properties even in the face of Romanian court orders.

¶3. (C) While our prior public and private criticisms of the BOR's conduct in this area have led to no noticeable change in attitude or action (ref), current political conditions in Romania and our willingness to help sponsor a dialogue may lure the parties back to the table. Each side has a clearly-defined bargaining chip. The Orthodox Church could ask Parliament not to pursue legislation the BOR has supported in the past that would allocate property based on the majority religious denomination of the local population. (Note: Romania is approximately 88 percent Orthodox, with many seized Greek Catholic properties in overwhelmingly Orthodox communities. Most of these properties have not been returned to the Greek Catholics. In some cases Romanian courts have ordered restitution but local officials, with the backing of the Orthodox Church, have not implemented the decisions. End Note.) The proposed legislation is thought to have support in Parliament but not among the major party leaderships.

¶4. (C) The Greek Catholic leadership believes that such legislation, if passed, would be declared unconstitutional,

our American-based interlocutor told us, emphasizing that it also calls into question the entire legal process of restoring property in Romania. In exchange for an Orthodox agreement not to pursue the legislation, the Greek Catholics could offer to suspend any number of active and pending lawsuits against BOR. This would resonate with the Orthodox Church; a close aide to the Patriarch separately complained to Poloff that they perceive the Romanian court system as becoming increasingly sympathetic to Greek Catholic claims.

15. (C) Comment: Each side is leaving itself some wiggle room. The Patriarch told Ambassador that conservatives in his church were against restarting a dialogue. The Patriarch's aide recently told Poloff that local officials rather than the church hierarchy were at fault for failure to implement the court orders, though it is hard to believe BOR leaders were not at least aware of these activities given the strict hierarchy of the Orthodox Church. At the same time, the U.S.-based Greek Catholic priest emphasized his Romanian Greek-Catholic colleagues remained wary and distrustful of the Orthodox. While the BOR may hold a greater share of the blame, the Greek Catholics stand to lose more from a continued stalemate or - in a worst-case scenario - from the passage of a law that clearly favors the Orthodox majority at their expense.

GITENSTEIN